DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 356 101 PS 021 438

AUTHOR Kostelnik, Marjorie J.
TITLE Developmentally Appropriate Programs. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education, Urbana, Ill.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO EDO-PS-93-7
PUB DATE 93
CONTRACT RI88062012
NOTE 3p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses - ERIC Clearinghouse Products (071) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Achievement; *Child Development; Cultural Differences; Early Childhood Education; Program Implementation; Special Needs Students; *Teacher Expectations of Students; Teacher Guidance; *Teacher Student Relationship; *Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS Caregiver Child Relationship; *Developmentally Appropriate Programs; ERIC Digests; Program Characteristics

ABSTRACT

This digest debunks myths about developmentally appropriate programs (DAPs) and discusses essential characteristics of developmentally appropriate practices. Common myths or erroneous assumptions about DAPs assume that: (1) there is only one right way to implement a DAP; (2) DAPs are unstructured, and practitioners offer minimal guidance to the children in their care; (3) in DAPs, the expectations for children's behavior and learning are low; (4) academics have no place in DAPs; and (5) DAPs are inappropriate for culturally diverse groups, and for children from varying socioeconomic backgrounds or with special needs. Determining practices which are essential to DAPs, however, requires more than debunking myths. First, developmentally appropriate practice involves taking into account everything that is known about how children develop and learn, and matching that to the content and strategies planned for them in early childhood programs. Second, treating children as individuals and not as a cohort group is critical to DAPs. Finally, developmentally appropriate practice requires treating children with respect by recognizing their changing capabilities and viewing them in the context of their family, culture, and community, as well as their past experience and current circumstances. (BC)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED356101

ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education
University of Illinois
805 West Pennsylvania Avenue
Urbana, Illinois 61801
(217) 333-1386

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy

ERIC Digest

EDO-PS-93-7

Developmentally Appropriate Programs

Marjorie J. Kostelnik

PS 021 738

The phrase *developmentally appropriate* is currently used to describe a great many early childhood education practices. This term is sometimes used to justify such incompatible notions as readiness programs that structure children's learning within narrowly defined parameters and programs that advocate giving children the gift of time by providing little or no structure. It may be used to rationalize grouping children by ability or by almost any criteria *other* than ability. These inconsistencies have led to much confusion about what developmentally appropriate practices (DAP) or programs entail (Walsh, 1991).

Debunking the Myths about DAP

In the absence of informed understanding, myths have sprung up to explain what DAP means. Some of these myths represent collective opinions that are based on false assumptions or are the product of fallacious reasoning. Others result from intuitive interpretations of child behavior or superficial understanding of child development and learning-related theories and research (Spodek, 1986). Still more myths have been created as a way for people to make finite and absolute a concept that is in fact open-ended and amenable to many variations. Some of the most common myths or erroneous assumptions about DAP are:

1. There is only one right way to implement a developmentally appropriate program. This belief is based on the underlying assumption that one method of teaching suits all children. On the contrary, individual teaching episodes can and should be qualified by "it depends" (Newman and Church, 1990). Practitioners need to continually weigh what they do in relation to their knowledge about how children develop and learn; examine their assumptions and learn from the children as they evaluate the effectiveness of their teaching; and search for the *best answers* (rather than one *right answer*) to meet the needs of children with a wide range of abilities, learning styles, interests, and backgrounds at a particular time and in a particular situation.

2. Developmentally appropriate programs are unstructured and practitioners offer minimal, if any, guidance to the children in their care. Structure refers to the extent to which teachers develop an instructional plan, then organize the physical setting and social environment to support the achievement of educational goals (Spodek, Saracho, and Davis, 1991). By this definition, developmentally appropriate classrooms are highly structured, but fluid enough to use input from the children (Newman and Church, 1990) to change the teacher's instructional plan. Children may ask questions, suggest alternatives, express interests, and develop plans that may lead the instruction in new directions so that instructional goals can be reached. Developmentally appropriate classrooms are active, but not chaotic; children are on-task, but not rigidly following a single line of inquiry. Overall instructional goals are merged with more immediate ones to create a flexible, stimulating classroom structure.

3. In developmentally appropriate programs, the expectations for children's behavior and learning are low. Learning can be characterized as occurring in two directions, vertically and horizontally. Vertical learning is traditional hierarchical learning, that is, piling new facts or skills on top of previously learned ones to increase the number and complexity of facts and skills attained. Horizontal learning, however, is conceptually based. In this framework, experiences occur more or less simultaneously, and the role of the learner becomes that of making connections among these experiences, which leads to an understanding of the world through the development of increasingly elaborate concepts. Both vertical and horizontal learning are essential to human understanding, but horizontal learning, also known as "concept development," tends to be neglected in traditional primary education. Because children in the early years are establishing the conceptual base from which all future learning will proceed, their need for a solid, broad foundation is great. The breadth of the conceptual base children form eventually influences their performance in school. A balance in the curriculum, with both kinds of learning addressed and valued, is a fundamental aspect of DAP. Such a balance results not in children learning *less*, but in children learning *better*.

4. Academics have no place in developmentally appropriate programs. Proponents and opponents of this myth in the early childhood community tend to equate academics with technical subskills or rote instruction; confuse concepts with methods; and ignore the ways in which reading, writing, and number-related behavior and understanding emerge in young children's lives. Children may manifest literacy-related behaviors and an interest in counting and calculating very early, seeking new knowledge and skills as they mature and their capacities to *know* and *do* increase. There is no specific time before or after which this learning is either appropriate or inappropriate. Programs that focus on isolated skill development and rely on long periods of whole group instruction or abstract paper-and-pencil activities are unlikely to meet the needs of young children. By contrast, those that emphasize concepts and processes, and use small group instruction and active manipulation of relevant, concrete materials and interactive learning, provide a solid foundation for academics within a context of meaningful activity.

5. DAP is inappropriate for culturally diverse groups, for children of varying socioeconomic backgrounds, or for children with special needs. While specific details of what is

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

appropriate for children will vary from population to population and from child to child, the principles guiding developmentally appropriate programs are universally applicable. To put it another way, one might ask, For what children is it appropriate to ignore how they develop and learn? If the answer is none, then there is no group for whom the basic tents of DAP do not apply.

The Essentials of DAP

Figuring out what does or does not constitute developmentally appropriate practice requires more than debunking the myths related to DAP. It involves looking at every practice in context and making judgments about each child and the environment in which he or she is functioning. The guidelines for DAP put forward by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (Bredekamp, 1987), and later corroborated and embellished by organizations such as the National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE) and the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP), provide an excellent resource for thinking about DAP. They serve to inform our decision making and to give us a basis for continually scrutinizing our professional practices. Guidelines, however, cannot be expected to tell us everything there is to know about DAP. Every day practitioners find themselves in situations in which they must make judgments about what to value and what to do.

The essence of DAP can be expressed as:

Taking into account everything we know about how children develop and learn, and matching that to the content and strategies planned for them in early childhood programs. Specialized knowledge about child development and learning is the cornerstone of professionalism in early childhood education. Such knowledge encompasses recognizing common developmental threads among all children and understanding significant variations across cultures. Teachers and caregivers with the knowledge needed to do these things are better equipped and more likely to engage in developmentally appropriate practices; more likely to accept typical variations among children and accurately recognize potential problems that may require specialized intervention; and more likely to understand the degree of developmental readiness children need to achieve particular goals.

Treating children as individuals, not as a cohort group. Practitioners are called on daily to make decisions that require them to see each child as distinct from all others. In their efforts to guide children's instruction and establish appropriate expectations, teachers and caregivers must weigh such variables as the children's experiences, knowledge and skills, age, and level of comprehension. Contextual factors, and physical resources and the amount of time available, can also affect teacher judgments.

Treating children with respect by recognizing their changing capabilities, and viewing them in the context of their family, culture, and community, and their past experience and current circumstances. Respect involves having faith in children's ability to eventually learn the information, behavior, and skills they will need to constructively function on their own. Having respect implies believing children are capable of changing their behavior and of making self-judgments. Caregivers and teachers manifest respect when they allow children to think for themselves, make decisions, work toward their own solutions to problems, and communicate their ideas. Out of respect, child care workers allow children to make choices about activities and where to sit at the lunch table. They encourage toddlers to pour their own juice, preschoolers to become actively engaged in clean-up, and school-age children to help determine the activities for the day. Respect for children's increasing competence involves allowing them to experience the exhilaration of accomplishment, and recognizing that self-control is an emerging skill that children achieve over time, given adequate support and guidance. With this in mind, children's transgressions are handled as gaps in knowledge and skills, not as character flaws.

Conclusion

Experiences planned for children and expectations for children should reflect the notion that early childhood is a time of life qualitatively different from the later school years and adulthood. Granting individual interpretation of the essence of DAP, the basic tenets outlined above provide a common foundation for defining high quality early childhood programs. Such programs are ones in which children of all abilities, ages, races, cultures, religious beliefs, socioeconomic, and family and lifestyle backgrounds feel lovable, valuable, and competent.

For More Information

Bredekamp, S. Ed. *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children From Birth Through Age 8.* Expanded Edition. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1987.

Kostelnik, Marjorie J. "Recognizing the Essentials of Developmentally Appropriate Practice." *Child Care Information Exchange* (March, 1993): 73-77.

Kostelnik, Marjorie J. "MYTHS Associated with Developmentally Appropriate Programs." *Young Children* (May, 1992): 17-23. EJ 447 666.

Kostelnik, Marjorie J., Whiren, A.P., and Soderman, A.K. *Developmentally Appropriate Practice for Early Education: A Practical Guide.* New York: MacMillan, 1993.

Newman, J.M., and Church, S.M. "Myths of Whole Language. Commentary" *The Reading Teacher* 44 (1) (1990): 20-26. EJ 413 063.

Spodek, B. *Today's Kindergarten.* New York: Teachers College Press, 1986.

Walsh, D.J. "Extending the Discourse on Developmental Appropriateness." *Early Education and Development* 2 (2) (1991): 109-119. EJ 441 902.

References with an EJ (ERIC journal) number are available through the originating journal, interlibrary loan services, or article reproduction clearinghouses: UMI (800) 732-0616; or ISI (800) 523-1850.

This publication was funded by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. OERI 88-062012. Opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of OERI. ERIC Digests are in the public domain and may be freely reproduced and disseminated.